



ROBIN HOOD AND HIS MERRY MEN

Retold for the younger reader

*Geeta Bhawan Library & Reading Room,
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TALES RETOLD FOR YOUNGER READERS



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How Robert of Locksley Became Robin Hood

Many years ago, when Richard the First was King of England, there lived near Nottingham on the edge of Sherwood Forest a youth named Robert. He was a tall young fellow with merry blue eyes and a frank, open face. As a boy he had roamed Sherwood Forest and knew every nook and cranny of it, every wide, babbling stream, every dark, leafy glade.

Robert was an adventurous youth and handy with the oak staff with which men in those days often fought. It was said of him that not a man in Nottingham was more skilful with the long bow, and even as a boy he had often beaten his elders in archery contests.

But Robert was slow to anger and he quarrelled with no one if he could help it. He had a cheerful laugh and was popular with all the neighbours. He was especially popular with a certain maiden called Marian, the pretty daughter of a local gentleman named Sir Richard of Lea. Though Robert's father was only a yeoman everyone hoped the young pair would be married one day.

When our story begins Robert of Locksley had just come of age. It was a winter's day and the snow lay like a thick blanket over all Nottinghamshire. Robert was trudging back to his farm from the town where he had had business to do. He came through Sherwood Forest by a path which few people except himself knew.

He watched the deer looking for food and the other wild animals, the squirrels and rabbits and hedgehogs which were more common in those days than now. He thought of the cruel and unjust game laws which made it a crime for a hungry man to shoot a wild deer, even for food.

The deer were preserved for the sport of the rich and noble, and woe to the commoner who killed one! If he was caught as much as aiming bow and arrow at the royal deer his right hand would be chopped off. If he killed the animal he could be hanged.

Robert went on his way, thinking of more cheerful things. Perhaps he thought of Sir Richard of Lea's pretty daughter Marian, and of when he could ask for her hand in marriage. Since the death of his own father Robert had many responsibilities. He now farmed Locksley himself and looked after the half-a-dozen men who worked for him.

Locksley was a small but prosperous farm and Robert knew that a certain gentleman named Sir Guy of Gisborne had his eye on it. Sir Guy of Gisborne was a hard, ruthless man of Norman blood who managed the vast surrounding estates of the Abbot of St. Mary's. The Abbot of St. Mary's was the brother of the Sheriff of Nottingham, and the Sheriff and the Abbot were the two richest noblemen in the county.

They had grown rich at the expense of the poor, Robert knew, and by seizing farms exactly like Locksley on the slightest legal excuse. But someday King Richard — Richard the Lionhearted — would come back from fighting the pagans and England would again be justly ruled.

For when our story begins Richard had gone on a Crusade to the Holy Land where he covered himself in glory, but left his poor country to look after itself. He had left his brother Prince John to rule in his place.

Prince John was a coward and a weakling who let the powerful nobles — men like the Abbot and the Sheriff and Sir Guy — do exactly what they liked. Prince John hoped that his elder brother would be killed in the Holy Land and never come home. He was jealous of Richard's fame and bravery. Worse, he knew that the King would demand an account of how England had been ruled in his absence.

Meanwhile the common people of England suffered — and waited.

But some were too hungry to wait. Such a hungry man was old Sebald. Sebald was a serf, which meant he was little better than a slave, forced to work on the fat lands of the Abbot of St. Mary's.

But Robert was slow to anger and he quarrelled with no one — if he could help it. He had a cheerful laugh and was popular with all the neighbours. He was especially popular with a certain maiden called Marian, the pretty daughter of a local gentleman named Sir Richard of Lea. Though Robert's father was only a yeoman everyone hoped the young pair would be married one day.

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Early that winter Sebald had fallen ill and could work no longer. Guy of Gisborne had therefore turned Sebald out of his miserable cottage and left him to starve.

It meant nothing to Sir Guy that old Sebald had a wife and baby and a small son. He cared little when he heard that Sebald's wife and baby had frozen to death in the snow shortly afterwards. Such tragedies were all too common in the bad days when Prince John ruled England.

That afternoon Sebald suddenly saw the herd of deer at the edge of Sherwood Forest. Shivering with cold in his thin rags the old man glanced stealthily around, listening. No one was near.

He cautiously raised his bow, fitted the notch of an arrow to the bowstring and let fly. A plump deer leapt into the air and fell to the ground, kicking. Sebald ran to the animal and instantly finished him off with his dagger. It was food enough to keep himself and his starving son for a month.

He began to cut the deer into pieces. But as he worked in silent haste a long shadow fell across the snow behind him. Sebald knew what that shadow meant — a gamekeeper, or perhaps even Sir Guy himself! He shook with terror, hardly daring to look up.

When at last he did he found he was looking into a pair of bright blue eyes. He saw a tall young man, of strong, supple build, who carried a long oak staff in his hand and a bow slung over his shoulder. Though the young man was towering Sebald slowly stopped trembling. For everyone knew the young owner of Locksley by sight and had heard of his reputation for fairness.

'Master Robin!' he cried, for Robert was usually called Robin by the country folk. 'It was an accident, sir.'

'I saw the "accident",' Robert scowled. 'Haven't you heard that it is death to poach the worthy Abbot of St. Mary's deer?'

'I was hungry, good sir,' the old man whimpered. 'You will not tell Sir Guy?'

Robert looked grave, but there was a twinkle in his eye. 'No, I will not tell Guy of Gisborne,' he said. 'I've sometimes had these little — er — accidents myself. But quick, man! Let's hide the carcass before a gamekeeper comes along.'

Together the two men dragged the slain deer towards



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Locksley Farm, which was only half a mile distant. On the way Sebald told Robert his story. As Robert listened his blood boiled at the cruelty of it.

'Bring your boy to the farm,' he said, 'and we'll see if we can't find a job for him, and for you too.'

They had scarcely reached Locksley before the game-keeper, whom Robert had feared, found the spot where Sebald had shot the deer. He saw the bloodstains in the snow and found the antlers of the dead animal. Here was proof enough that the Abbot's deer had been illegally killed.

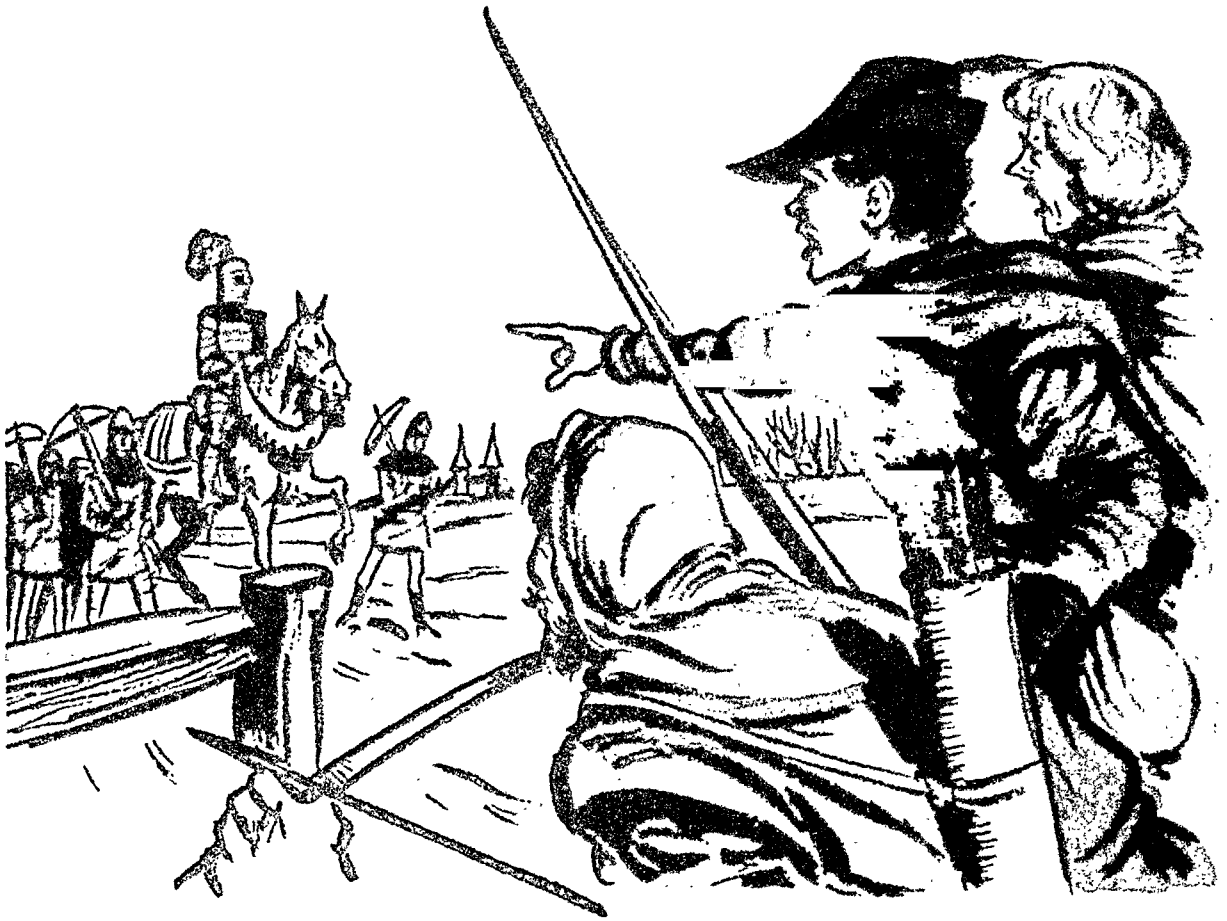
Better still there was proof of who did it. For the game-keeper easily traced the footsteps through the snow to Locksley farm. He ran at once to Guy of Gisborne with the news.

To Sir Guy it was good news indeed. Robert of Locksley a poacher of the royal deer — and caught red-handed too! It was just the excuse Guy of Gisborne had long been waiting for.

'Now we have him!' Guy exclaimed, buckling on his suit of steel armour and reaching for his broadsword. 'We shall seize Locksley farm in the name of our sovereign Prince John and, I think, have this young Robert's right hand chopped off, unless the Abbot gives me permission to have him strung up by the neck to the nearest tall oak tree!'

Sir Guy chuckled to himself as he gave orders to his men-at-arms. Armed with sword and lance, mounted on his charger, the Norman knight set forth from his fortified manor house to make an end of Robert of Locksley.

Robert saw them coming across the fields — a procession



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of a dozen armed men, led by the knight on horseback. Their swords and shields glinted in the light of the setting sun and they carried deadly crossbows.

They came directly across the fields towards the farmhouse, trampling down the young wheat. Robert guessed at once what they had come for.

‘Now, men,’ he said quietly to Sebald and the handful of farm labourers who worked for him, ‘let us receive our distinguished guests politely, but let us bend our bows in case they have come to seek sport. For they all appear to be armed to the teeth.’

And he waited carelessly on the porch of the farmhouse for the group to approach. Sir Guy reined in his horse when

he was within shouting distance of the house. He called out through the lowered steel visor of his helmet:

'Robert of Locksley,' he called, 'put down your arms and surrender yourself to me.'

'And why should I?' Robert asked gently.

'Because you have slain the royal deer. And for that I declare you a criminal,' said Sir Guy. 'Your farm shall be taken from you and your right hand cut off so that you can never draw bow again.'

'All this without trial?' Robert said, hardly able to believe his ears.

'Trial is not for the like of dogs like you,' shouted Sir Guy.

Robert fingered his bow. 'No,' he said, still quietly, though his blue eyes had become as hard as the steel of Sir Guy's armour, 'justice in England can no longer be expected; not until our good King Richard returns. Stop your men, Sir Guy. If they come another step forward I cannot answer for their safety.'

Sir Guy covered himself quickly with his shield. Then he nodded to one of his men. A crossbow twanged and an arrow hissed through the air. It missed Robert by a hair's breadth but pierced the skull of the farm labourer standing beside him.

'First blood to you, Sir Guy,' Robert said between his teeth, and bending his bow he let fly.

Robert's arrow struck the visor of Guy of Gisborne's helmet with such force that the heavily armoured knight nearly toppled from his horse. A second arrow, released with lightning speed, struck down the man-at-arms who had killed the farm labourer.

'Now if they take us,' Robert said grimly to his men, 'we're all dead. So shoot not for sport but for your very lives.'

In a moment the dusk was dark with arrows. Sir Guy's men-at-arms knelt behind their deadly crossbows. But the longbows of the farmers were more accurate, for they had been trained by Robert himself, the greatest archer in Nottingham.

Three of Sir Guy's men had already fallen. Guy himself was encased in steel and he slashed wildly with his broadsword, urging the others forward.

Then a cunningly aimed arrow from Robert caught him a glancing blow which threw him from his horse. Seeing their leader down, the men-at-arms wavered. Sebald rushed forth with his dagger, striking at Sir Guy.

'That's for my wife you froze to death, and that's for the baby you starved,' he yelled.

But one of Guy's men drove a sword into Sebald's heart. Robert loosed another arrow through the swordsman's head. With four men now dead, the rest of the group took to their heels and ran.

Guy of Gisborne, in his arrow-proof armour, was left alone on the field.

Robert waved back his men. He put down his bow and drew his sword. He would deal with Sir Guy alone and in fair combat . . .

The combat did not last long. Without armour Robert was lighter on his feet and a hundred times quicker than his enemy. Soon Guy of Gisborne lay stretched in the tram-

pled snow. The point of Robert's sword tickled his throat.

'Do you yield yourself, Sir Knight?' Robert demanded.

'Never, villain,' growled Sir Guy.

Robert lowered his sword, unable to kill a defenceless man.

'Then we'll send you home in style,' he said. 'Tie him up, men. Tuck him up like the pig he is.'

So they tied up the proud Norman knight and put him back on his horse — facing the horse's tail!

And in that undignified manner Sir Guy of Gisborne returned to the great gates of the noble abbey, laughed at by all the countryside.



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But Robert of Locksley did not laugh for long. He knew too well that Guy of Gisborne would soon be back again, this time with a hundred armed men.

Robert knew that never again could he farm Locksley in peace. He had killed men while resisting arrest. He knew that from this day onwards he was an outlaw. Every hand would be against him. If he, or any of his men, were caught they would be instantly hanged.

‘If we’re caught,’ he said, his eyes beginning to twinkle again. ‘If . . .’ And he laughed aloud. ‘Who is for Sherwood Forest, men? A free life and a merry one. Good hunting and roast venison every night for supper.’

When next morning Sir Guy of Gisborne returned, with a small army in the name of the law, he found Locksley deserted. But Sherwood Forest had some new inhabitants. Men already spoke of a tall youth who wore a cloak of Lincoln Green and a hood to hide his face.

Robert of Locksley had become Robin Hood.

How Robin Won a Silver Bugle

The fame of Robin Hood and his band of outlaws spread rapidly through the county. After dark few dared to take the lonely roads which led through Sherwood Forest. The Sheriff of Nottingham received daily complaints that it was no longer safe to travel in the neighbourhood.

These complaints came mostly from rich merchants and prosperous churchmen who had been relieved of their luggage and loose cash by hooded men dressed in Lincoln Green.

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The poor and the hungry, however, told a different story. They spoke of meeting groups of merry men in the forest depths, men who had given them feasts of venison and tankards of ale and often sent them away not only with full bellies but with a shilling or two in their pockets.

For Robin Hood's band of outlaws had their own private laws — strictly enforced by Robin himself. In brief, these laws were as follows:

'Look you, men,' said Robin on the very first night they spent together in the woods, 'see to it that no harm comes to any woman or child that falls into our hands. Yeomen and farmers, men who work honestly for a living, they too shall be our friends. Yes, and also any knight who is just and kind to the poor.'

Robin was probably thinking of Marian's father, good Sir Richard of Lea, who had pawned the estate of Lea in order to go on the Crusade to the Holy Land with King Richard the Lionhearted. Marian, during her father's absence, had been left in the care of the Abbot of St. Mary's; and Robin had not seen her for many months.

'But,' he continued with a grin, 'bishops and abbots who rob the poor, sheriffs and their men who seize and beat the poor, chopping off their hands and hanging them, merchants who grow rich by cheating their customers — these we shall seek out. They shall help pay our living expenses!'

They helped so much — though unwillingly — that Robin and his men lived very merrily beneath the leafy boughs of Sherwood Forest. So life jogged happily along.

One fine June morning, however, Robin found himself



Robin and his men lived very merrily

feeling a little restless. Life under the greenwood tree was jolly enough, but this morning he had a sudden longing to see something of the great outside world again.

Along the roads which skirted Sherwood Forest people were passing, some on horses or mules, others in farm carts, most of them on foot. They were all dressed in their Sunday best clothes and they were hurrying towards Nottingham.

Now Robin had not been in Nottingham since that day last winter when he returned through the snow to Locksley, and he was filled with a desire to see the town once more, even though the Sheriff of Nottingham had put a price on his head and it would be death if he were seen there.

From the edge of the woods Robin called out to a ragged old man who was trudging along after the others. The old man, startled at first by the sight of the hooded outlaw, was reassured by Robin's friendly manner.

The old man's name was Hodge, and he had matted red hair. He begged, he told Robin, to pick up a few pennies before it was time for the great fair in Nottingham.

Where is that, Robin asked.

'Where there's a fair,' said Hodge in surprise, 'that can't be far off.'

Robin told Hodge that no less a person than Prince John himself was to meet the Sheriff of Nottingham. A fair was to be held in honour of the great event. There would be a tournament with knights in armour, music and dancing in the streets, and an archery contest in which the most famous bowmen in all England would take part.

Robin listened with interest. Afterwards he took Hodge to the town. The host gave him food and drink — and more money than the poor old man had ever seen before.

On that day a poor old beggar with matted red hair, covered in dirty rags, mixed with the gay crowd who pushed round the high grounds in Nottingham. When asked, he said his name was Hodge.

Later, while he stood beneath a painted signboard as though trying to read it, which made everyone laugh; for how could an ignorant person like old Hodge be expected to read? The sign said that a certain dangerous outlaw known as Robin Hood was wanted dead or alive. To the person who caught Robin Hood the Sheriff of Nottingham offered

a reward of forty pieces of gold — more money than the average citizen of Nottingham earned in a lifetime.

Old Hodge moved on, mumbling to himself. Near a gate were a group of smart young men in leather jerkins waiting to take places in the great event of the afternoon — the archery match. To the winner Prince John would present a silver arrow and a silver bugle.

Hodge joined them, which made everybody laugh again. A ragged old beggar like him matching his skill against England's finest bowmen!

Even Prince John laughed when he saw the ragged man standing among the stout young bowmen. He thought Hodge must be some kind of clown who had entered the contest in order to provide added amusement.

There were thirty-six archers in all. They were lined up six at a time. The one whose arrow was nearest the centre of the target had to shoot again against the other winners of the first trials. Then the two who were nearest this time would shoot it out for the prize.

To everyone's surprise old Hodge's arrow came nearest the centre when he took his place among the first six. Prince John burst out laughing. He was in a good mood because the last he'd heard of his brother was that King Richard had been taken captive on his way back from the Holy Land.

The Sheriff of Nottingham leaned across to his royal guest and said: 'Pure luck, sire. The old fool wasn't even looking at the target!'

This was true. Hodge had drawn his bow and shot so carelessly that he didn't seem to be trying. Even in the



Prince John, with the chest-red hair mixed with the gay crowd

himself, however, did not hardly glance at the target.

The target had been placed farther away this time and the six or seven archers were all skilled bowmen. One was named Hodge, and he was Prince John's own best archer, whom everybody regarded as a champion bowman.

Hodge's arrow pierced the black ring near the centre of the target and the crowd gave a cheer. Four more archers followed him, but not one of them touched the bull's-eye. Hodge, though slow to bow, grinned at his fellow archers.

"That is not a play!" he croaked, carelessly letting an arrow fly.

He then went back into the crowd. Hodge's arrow had pierced the bull's-eye. Hodge's square in the bull's-eye.

Prince John looked annoyed. He didn't like to see his own best archer equalled by this country lout. Perhaps it was still an accident, he thought.

This time it was the final round: old Hodge and Henry had to shoot it out.

'Beat him, Henry,' Prince John ordered, 'and I'll fill the silver bugle with silver coins.'

'Your worship,' cried Hodge in his high, squeaky old man's voice, 'this shooting at such big targets is sport for babies. Henry here is a man in my own class. Let us peel a willow wand, put it up at a hundred and fifty yards, and the first of us to split it takes the prize.'

'Then we'll be here all the evening,' Prince John sneered. 'But if Henry wishes . . . Only one shot, and the one nearest the wand wins.'

Henry, eyeing the old man with new respect, agreed. The willow twig was peeled and placed in the ground. From a hundred and fifty yards it seemed unlikely that the old man's eyes could even see it.

'You shoot first, Henry,' Hodge said, 'for the light is beginning to fail.'

Henry thanked him for his courtesy. Henry aimed slowly, studying the tiny, distant target. Then his bowstring twanged.

An 'Ah-h-h . . .' of wonder rose from the crowd. It was a splendid shot. Henry's arrow had actually grazed the willow wand.

Then Hodge took his place. This time there was nothing offhand about his manner. He studied the target and tested



Hodge only grinned and tossed them to the crowd

the wind as carefully as Henry had done. He aimed — and let fly.

A shout went up from the watchers. Hodge's arrow had split the wand clean in two!

Prince John presented the prize to him with a scowl. Hodge had to remind him of the silver coins he had promised to the winner. But when John unwillingly filled the bugle with coins Hodge only grinned and tossed them to the crowd. John's face went red at the insult.

'Stop that man!' he shouted. 'He must be a thief in disguise to throw my royal gift to the crowd! Seize him!'

Now for some time Sir Guy of Gisborne had been watching

old Hodge with growing suspicion. He grabbed at the ragged old man, catching at his matted red hair.

The hair came away in his hands. It was a wig!

The Sheriff of Nottingham gasped. Guy of Gisborne stared at Hodge until his eyes nearly popped out.

'It is Robin Hood!' he cried.

'Seize him!' Prince John thundered.

Quick as a cat the bent old man straightened himself up. His eyes danced with blue fire as he swiftly fitted an arrow to his bowstring. He pointed it straight at the cowardly Prince's heart.

'Take back that order,' he said coolly.



Prince John went white with fear

Prince John went white with fear. He had already seen enough of Robin Hood's skill with bow and arrow.

'Let him go!' he screamed in terror. 'Let him go — at once!'

In the dusk Robin Hood vanished among the crowd. Though Guy of Gisborne and the Sheriff's men searched all Nottingham they found no trace of him.

For Robin Hood had already reached the depths of Sherwood Forest. Around the bonfire that night, while a huge haunch of venison was roasting, he retold the story of that afternoon's adventure. His listeners admired the silver bugle and rocked with laughter.

The one who laughed hardest was old Hodge — the real Hodge, whose rags Robin Hood had borrowed for the day.

How Robin Hood Met Little John

And so Robin Hood's fame continued to spread.

It reached even Maid Marian within the great fortified walls of St. Mary's Abbey. Often when the Abbot, who hated the bold outlaw, spoke of Robin's daring exploits Marian would hide a smile.

Poor Marian had little enough to smile at these days. Her father, Sir Richard of Lea, had not been heard of for a long while and everyone told her he was dead. Meanwhile the Abbot was her guardian and had legal power to treat her as though she were his own daughter. Marian knew that the Abbot was planning to give her in marriage to a rich nobleman called Sir Roger who was known by the nickname of Roger the Cruel.

Marian could only pray for her dear father's return and hold fast to the belief that he was still alive. For inside the walls of the Abbey she was little better than a prisoner.

Robin Hood knew nothing of this. It was high summer and the birds sang gaily in the leafy glades of Sherwood Forest. Yesterday the band had relieved a rich convoy of thieving bankers of a sack of gold and, better yet, a cask or two of the finest Canary wine. A fine stag hung ready for roasting in the woodland larder, and the band of men was working up an appetite by practising archery or playing at quarter-staves.

Playing at quarter-staves consisted of mock battles with long oak sticks or cudgels. It was a rough game in which the loser often escaped black and blue with bruises.

Robin was not only the best bowman in Sherwood Forest and the most skilful swordsman. He was also the band's champion with the quarter-staff.

He was twirling his quarter-staff lightly between thumb and forefinger that afternoon and thinking how pleasant life was. He had left the others and wandered off by himself down a narrow path which followed the side of a stream, where silver trout darted away at the sight of his shadow. He hummed cheerfully to himself, feeling on top of the world. An outlaw perhaps he was, but in Sherwood Forest he was king.

The path wound down suddenly to cross the broad stream. The water was deep at this point and there was a long log across it which served as a bridge.

Robin stepped lightly on to this narrow bridge before he saw that another man, a stranger, had at the same moment

stepped on to the far side. Neither Robin nor the stranger at first saw each other.

When they did they were both almost halfway across.

'Step back, friend,' cried Robin, 'and let your betters cross first.'

'And who, may I ask, are you?' asked the other sarcastically. 'Step back yourself.'

The stranger was a giant of a man. He must have been nearly seven feet tall. He loomed head and shoulders over Robin and he too carried a huge quarter-staff. He handled it as though it was a quill pen.

'Out of my way, little fellow,' Robin said, angered by the giant's lazy smile. 'Or else I shall be forced to push you back.'

'You?' The stranger shrugged good-naturedly. 'You and who else? Back, fool, before I lose my temper.'

'I see I shall have to teach you a painful lesson,' Robin said, beginning to twirl his oak stick more rapidly. 'The bigger you are the bigger the splash you will make as I knock you into the river.'

The huge man continued to smile. His fists were like haunches of venison as they grasped his staff more tightly.

'I hate to do this to you,' he said. 'But since you insist . . .'

And he struck at Robin Hood, a blow which would have felled an ox. Robin caught it skilfully on the side of his own staff and returned the blow with interest. He caught the giant square on the head. But instead of toppling over he merely shook himself, still grinning.

'I see you are not inexperienced in the game of quarter-staves,' he said. 'Now let me teach you a new trick or two.'



'Step back, friend,' cried Robin, 'and let your betters cross first'

And he landed Robin a whack on the ribs which made the dust fly. For the next five minutes the two men balanced themselves on the narrow slippery log over the stream. Blow followed blow, making such a racket that the very squirrels in the trees stopped to listen.

'Take that!' Robin shouted, beginning to enjoy the battle.

'And that! And that!' cried his opponent, laughing good-humouredly.

Such a battle even Sherwood Forest had seldom seen. The woods echoed with the sound. A handful of Robin's men came running just in time to see the end of it.

Robin had lurched forward, swinging his staff valiantly

in an effort to finish the business once and for all. The giant, amazingly light-footed for his size, stepped back, made a feint with one end of his stick and brought the other end down on Robin's head.

Robin turned, slipped . . . and fell splash into the middle of the river!

He might have drowned — for he had little breath left for swimming — had not his recent enemy at once jumped in after him. The huge man picked up Robin by the scruff of the neck and brought him safely to shore. They both sat on the bank for a moment, trying to catch their breath.

'You put up a good fight,' the stranger admitted generously.

'Perhaps,' Robin grinned. 'But the best man won. If you would like to cross the bridge first, do so, with my blessing.'

They both laughed until they were out of breath again.

'But who are you?' Robin asked finally.

'My name is John,' the giant said, 'and I have come to Sherwood Forest to look for someone. You see I overslept this morning and the man I work for ordered me to be given forty lashes with the whip. I took the whip and lashed him instead. Therefore I am looking for someone else to work for. I am looking for a certain Robin Hood.'

'I very much fear that you've found him,' said Robin.

'You?'

'None other. Wet and much the worse for wear,' Robin laughed, 'but Robin Hood in person. And at your service.'

They clasped hands. From that day on John became Robin's right-hand man and closest friend.



Robin turned, slipped . . . and fell

The band at once nicknamed him 'Little' John, and that night around the fire Robin Hood himself described with much glee how Little John had given their leader a sound thrashing.

How Little John Met His Match

Little John was a useful addition to the band in Sherwood Forest. His constant good temper made him popular. And in archery he was second only to Robin Hood. With the quarter-staff no one was his equal. His only bad habit was that he still sometimes slept too late.

One drowsy August morning Little John stretched his mighty limbs and rubbed the dust out of his sleepy eyes. He blinked a couple of times, then opened his eyes wider than ever.

‘Do you see what I see?’ he exclaimed.

Robin and two or three other members of the band glanced round. Coming up the leafy path towards them they saw a solitary man. He was a very slim young man wearing scarlet stockings. He had on a jerkin of finest suede, and shoes with silver buckles. His hair was curly and looked as though it had been carefully arranged with scented lotion. His hands were white and his fingernails were clean and neatly trimmed. Between his thumb and forefinger he carried — a rose.

He walked along with a delicate step as though fearing to dirty his feet. He was still unaware of the group watching him, for his thoughts were far away. From time to time he sniffed at the rose and sighed. His lips moved and Little John was almost sure that what he said to himself was — poetry!

Little John lay back on the grass squirming with laughter. Such a sight had never before been seen in Sherwood Forest.

‘Shall we have a little sport with the young darling?’ he said.

The others grinned as Little John rose and lumbered up to the stranger.

‘Poetry!’ Little John guffawed. ‘It is!’

The stranger stopped, looking at Little John as though he were a kind of harmless cart-horse.

‘Yes,’ he said in a refined voice. ‘It is a sonnet I have just composed to my lady love.’

‘He has a lady love!’ Little John mimicked his accent. ‘Does Mama know? She will be most cross.’

Little John leaned down and plucked the rose from the young man’s hand. He smelled it and made a face.

‘Please give it back to me,’ the young man said gently. ‘It was my lady’s parting gift.’

Little John was not usually so rude to strangers, but this morning he had overslept and awakened in a bad humour. He felt like teasing the young dandy.

‘Try to take it back,’ he said, and he twirled his quarter-staff threateningly.



‘Shall we have a little sport with the young darling?’ he said.

The slim young man sighed. 'I am a peaceful person,' he said, 'and have no wish to quarrel. Put that silly stick down.'

Little John laughed. 'I would lend you one like it,' he said, 'if I thought you were strong enough to hold it. And then we should see who dares to pass through Sherwood Forest without permission.'

The young man looked around helplessly. Robin Hood was about to call Little John back and tell him to stop teasing the stranger when the stranger sighed again.

'Very well, since you insist,' he said. 'One of those saplings there would make me a staff, I fancy.'

And he pointed towards the grove of young birch trees which grew beside the path. Robin Hood saw him finger the small trees, picking out one which was about two inches thick. Then he removed his beautiful suede jerkin, revealing a colourful silk shirt. Beneath the silk shirt Robin saw the young man's lithe muscles ripple as he gripped the sapling.

With a sharp wrench he pulled the tree up by its roots! Robin smiled to himself. Here was more sport than Little John perhaps reckoned on!

And so it proved.

As soon as the first blows had been exchanged Little John realised that he had at last met his match. The exquisite young dandy, this overdressed youth with the fair curly hair, gave Little John the hardest thumping he had had for many a long day.

To be sure Little John was not in the best of condition. He had slept too long and eaten far, far too much the



The exquisite young dandy with the fair curly hair gave Little John the hardest thumping he had for many a long day

night before. He swung like the giant he was, but the slim stranger was quicker of foot and gave him back blow for blow. Robin Hood and his men rolled on the turf with mirth at the sight of their huge champion so hard pressed. 'That pays you back for what you did to me at the bridge,' Robin called encouragingly. 'But hold. I think you've both had enough.'

'True,' said Little John, leaning on his staff to regain his breath. 'After this I shall have more respect for poetry and roses.'

The stranger too put down his young birch tree and bowed politely.

‘My name, gentlemen, is Will Gamell, and I have come to look for a cousin of mine who lives in these parts, one . . .’

‘One Robert of Locksley?’ Robin asked eagerly.

‘Known, I believe, as Robin Hood,’ Will Gamell nodded.

All now crowded round. For they knew Will Gamell’s name and how he had in fair combat recently slain one of Prince John’s knights who had insulted a woman — and been unjustly outlawed for it. All wanted to be the first to shake his hand, Little John in particular.

They named him Will Scarlett, in memory of the scarlet stockings, and he became an honoured member of the band. From then on Will Scarlett, Little John and Robin Hood were seldom seen without each other.

How Guy of Gisborne Came Home from Sherwood Forest

Guy of Gisborne had never forgotten the injury Robert of Locksley had done him. That humiliating ride back to St. Mary’s Abbey, tied with his face to his horse’s tail, still made him gnash his teeth with rage. He had sworn, sooner or later, to take the insolent outlaw and hang him.

Maid Marian in her room heard the warlike preparations in the Abbey courtyard below and trembled. Through the small iron-barred window she saw the horsemen in armour, the crossbowmen, the soldiers with their pikes and swords ready to set forth. What could a small group of

foresters, armed only with bow and arrow and quarter-staff, do against such a deadly army? Poor Robin was — as the Abbot himself jeeringly told her — as good as lost.

Sir Guy thought so too. This time he was taking no chances. He had gathered together more than a hundred men and he meant to beat the forest until he had found the fox's lair. He boasted that before night fell Robin Hood would be hanging by the neck from the Abbey gates.

The poor folk of the neighbourhood watched the procession with heavy hearts. They had not found the 'fox of Sherwood Forest' to be dangerous. In fact most of them had been befriended by Robin Hood's band at some time or other. Hungry families had often found an unexpected shoulder of venison in their kitchens when they came back from labouring in the fields. Hard-pressed tenant farmers who were unable to pay their rent to the Abbot's rent collectors sometimes discovered a gold coin or two waiting for them. Everyone knew that Robin Hood was the author of these good deeds, and many an elderly widow or sick child had reason to bless him in their prayers.

Needless to say Robin Hood knew all about the army Sir Guy was leading against him. He knew exactly how many they were, how armed, and the point where they planned to enter the forest. Half the peasants in Nottinghamshire were his willing spies.

Sir Guy's men entered the forest at dawn. The grey light hardly yet penetrated the heavy leaves and all was unnaturally still. The mounted men rode boldly forward, followed by the bowmen on foot.



He saw a bright sword lying square in the middle of the path

They had gone scarcely a hundred yards when their leader gave a shout. He saw a bright sword lying square in the middle of the path.

‘The scoundrels have heard us coming,’ he cried, ‘and taken to their heels, leaving weapons behind them like the cowards they are.’

He got down from his horse to pick up the sword. A voice from somewhere suddenly called:

‘Leave that alone, Hubert.’

Now the man’s name was actually Hubert and he jumped at the sound. The trouble was he couldn’t understand where the voice came from. Recovering from his astonishment, he reached down again.

‘Leave that alone, Hubert!’

‘Who is it?’ Hubert cried. ‘Where are you?’

‘Here!’ came a voice from the left. ‘No, here!’ came another from the right. ‘Here, here!’ called a third voice apparently from somewhere over his head.

Sir Guy and his men stared around them in wonder. There was no one to be seen. Hubert, angry, grasped for the sword again. This time there were no voices — but the sword began to move along the path of its own accord!

‘It’s bewitched,’ Hubert stammered.

‘Bewitched, fiddlesticks!’ Sir Guy shouted. ‘It’s a trick of some sort. After it, you fool!’

Sir Guy, of course, was right. It was a trick. Robin Hood had merely tied a long piece of string to the sword, which he looped round a tree trunk and tugged at from the shelter of a thick bush. But as Hubert stared at the disappearing sword the woodland around him was suddenly filled with weird laughter. It seemed to be alive with voices — yet no one was in sight.

Robin Hood’s men were all trained foresters. They knew how to move so stealthily that even the wild deer scarcely heard them coming. Dressed in Lincoln Green they were nearly invisible among the green leaves. They knew every clump of bushes and every tree in the forest and could travel from limb to limb as swiftly as monkeys.

The army marched forward, deeper into the forest, urged on by Sir Guy’s furious cursing. The strange, high-pitched laughter followed them. It came from all sides, but they caught sight of no one.



The boarding sagged and Sir Guy's horse reared

'The forest is haunted,' they whispered among themselves and they began to wish they were a hundred miles from the place.

The path grew narrower, so that they had to break up in smaller groups and go in single file. Every now and then the last man in the file would give a sudden yell. The leader would glance round just in time to see the poor fellow whisked up into a tree, dangling at the end of a rope. By the time the others had rushed back to help, the man had always vanished.

In this way ten or fifteen of Sir Guy's men disappeared

before nightfall. Where they had gone to, nobody knew, but the superstitious soldiers began to murmur and grumble. They thought their invisible enemies could only be wood-sprites and tree-goblins. Sir Guy found it hard to stop them from sneaking away in panic.

At dusk they came to a bridge across a swiftly running stream. Sir Guy was halfway across when the two logs which supported the boarding of the bridge slowly began to roll away, each in the opposite direction. The boarding sagged and Sir Guy's horse reared. It threw him into the middle of the river.

Sir Guy would have sunk to the bottom in his heavy steel armour and drowned had not strong arms dragged him out again. He stood spluttering at his rescuers.

He saw a huge giant of a man laughing at him. It was Little John. Beside the giant a handsome youth politely pretended to help dry his dripping suit of mail. It was Will Scarlett. But the merry blue eyes of the man who stood between them were what sent the blood into Sir Guy's cheeks.

'It's Robin Hood!' he shouted furiously. 'Kill him, men. Forty pieces of gold to the one who kills him.'

'Poor chap,' said Will Scarlett kindly, 'he's beginning to talk to himself.'

Little John tapped his forehead with a beefy forefinger. 'Touched, I fear,' he said with sympathy.

Robin said: 'He'll never find his way out of the forest in his present state of mind. We'd better give him an escort.'

Sir Guy continued to rage, shouting for his men. Slowly he began to understand why the three in Lincoln Green



He came back as he had come back months ago — back to front!

were smiling at him. Sir Guy of Gisborne's entire army had fled in fear and terror. Not one of them had stayed to rescue his master.

It was a long time before any man of that day's army dared to venture into Sherwood Forest again. The twenty or so men who had disappeared during the day all turned up again, safe and sound, except for a painful thrashing and a good ducking in the river.

Guy of Gisborne also returned to the Abbey unharmed. He had been given an escort as Robin promised, an escort dressed in Lincoln Green, and he came back on his own horse. He came back as he had come back months ago from Locksley — back to front!

The poor folk who had watched that morning's procession so sadly, lined the road for Sir Guy's home-coming. They laughed until the tears ran down their faces to see the proud Norman knight come home so humbly.

How Friar Tuck Joined the Band

A few weeks after Guy of Gisborne's unlucky visit to Sherwood Forest, Robin Hood, Little John and Will Scarlett set out to explore the vast woodland, hoping for adventure. The forest had been quiet of late. No one cared to disturb them. They had the place to themselves.

Their larder was well stocked with fat deer and wild boar and pheasants, for the royal gamekeepers now kept well away from Sherwood Forest. There were cheeses and great tubs of butter: gifts pressed on the outlaws by grateful farmers whom they had protected from the Sheriff of Nottingham's greedy soldiers. There was plenty of money, hidden in the gnarled roots of the oak tree which was their bank. Only a few days ago they had 'borrowed' a sack of gold on its way to the Abbot of St. Mary's strongroom. Life was beginning to be almost too easy.

Robin did not know that even then the Sheriff of Nottingham was secretly preparing a trap for him — baited with no less a person than poor Maid Marian.

To-day he felt in a festive mood. The three men strolled through the woods whistling and singing and idly lopping off branches of holly to test the sharpness of their swords. They came to the river at a place where there was no bridge.

On the river bank Robin saw a fat man stretched out in the sun. He wore the robes of a begging monk, a friar, and he seemed to be enjoying himself. Although alone he sang lustily. He stopped only to stuff a huge slab of pork pie into his big mouth. He washed it down with great swigs of ale. He ate greedily and with immense gusto. Even Little John was impressed.

‘The fellow is almost as broad as you are long,’ Robin said to Little John. ‘I think I’ll have some sport with him.’

And he went up to the friar and clapped him on the shoulder. The friar swallowed the wrong way but quickly recovered himself. He took another great bite from the pork pie and helped it down with another great draught of ale. Then he continued to munch contentedly. Robin toyed with his sword and tickled the fat man’s belly with it.

‘Up, Friar,’ he said. ‘Up, and carry me across the river so that I shall not wet my feet.’

The friar looked at the sharp point of the sword and then he looked at his unfinished pork pie. He looked back at the sword again and sighed.

‘I am a man of religion,’ he said, ‘and I accept the good with the bad. What must be, must be.’

And he rose patiently and bent his back. Robin climbed on to it, still holding his drawn sword. The friar plodded into the stream and waded slowly across. He went in up to his fat middle and at last reached the other bank. He put Robin on to the ground with another deep sigh.

Then with a swiftness surprising in a man of his bulk he seized Robin’s right wrist. He seized it so suddenly that he

had snatched away the sword before Robin knew what was happening.

'Now,' said the friar, 'it's my turn to ride.' He brushed Robin's leather jerkin with the point of the sword. 'Quick. Take me back to my dinner. I'm getting hungry again.'

There was nothing for it but to obey. Robin carried him back across the river, staggering under the load. The man weighed as much as an ox. Will Scarlett and Little John watched, shaking with merriment.

As Robin set the friar down again he caught him a sharp blow under the chin which sent the friar sprawling.

'No dinner yet,' Robin grinned. 'Back to the other bank. This time I ride again.'



'Up, Friar,' he said, 'and carry me across the river'

The friar shrugged his vast shoulders and motioned Robin to mount. He waded into the river again, but half-way across he stopped.

‘I fear I faint with hunger,’ he said. And he bent nearly double, dumping Robin well and truly into the water.

When Robin had swum to the bank he found the friar calmly finishing his pie. Robin put his sword back into its sheath and began to laugh.

‘Now this is the kind of monk I like,’ he said. ‘What’s your name?’

‘They call me Friar Tuck — for obvious reasons,’ said the friar, tucking into the last bit of the pie with regret. ‘And who may you be, rascal?’

‘Robin Hood.’

The friar rose quickly to his feet.

‘The man who sent Guy of Gisborne home bottom first!’ he exclaimed. ‘And the hero who has relieved the Abbot of St. Mary’s of his ill-gotten gains! Don’t say I’ve made Robin Hood carry me!’

‘Well, I made you carry me too,’ Robin laughed. ‘Now you’re just the kind of churchman our band needs. How about it, man? Will you be one of us?’

‘My holy cloth forbids me to join outlaws,’ said Friar Tuck solemnly, looking at his food-stained monk’s robe. ‘What fast days do you keep in Sherwood Forest?’

‘None,’ said Robin Hood. ‘Every day we feast on the King’s venison — out of pure patriotism, of course. Afterwards we fill in with pheasants, boar’s head, jugged hares, butter, cream and eggs. We have so many barrels of ale



Dumping Robin well and truly into the water

we sometimes swim in them and then wash ourselves down in tubs of wine.'

'Tempt me not,' said Friar Tuck, his mouth already beginning to water. 'And yet, would I not be doing only my Christian duty to come to you... We shall see, my son, we shall see...'

And Friar Tuck at once began to lead the way back towards the centre of the forest where he knew the band lived.

Friar Tuck preached few sermons in Sherwood Forest, but he sang heartily and he could cook a feast fit for a king. In a pinch, he could use sword and cudgel with the best. There was not a jollier man in Robin Hood's band than the good Friar Tuck.

How Maid Marian Was Wedded

While Robin Hood and his men made merry around their camp fire, singing ballads and drinking loyal toasts to King Richard — still a captive across the seas, according to Prince John — while the cheerful band in Sherwood Forest ate and drank and sang, a very different sort of gathering was being held in the Abbey of St. Mary's.

There four men were sitting round the polished table. They had drunk wine from rich crystal goblets and eaten off heavy silver plates, but there was no laughter or gaiety among them. Of the four, two were brothers: the fat Abbot himself and the powerful Sheriff of Nottingham. Two were Norman knights: Sir Guy of Gisborne, silent and glum, and Sir Roger the Cruel, dark and cunning. They were talking about Marian and her father, Sir Richard of Lea.

Now Sir Richard had pawned his estate of Lea in order to borrow enough money to go with King Richard to the Holy Land. The man who had lent him the money was the Abbot. The debt fell due at the end of the month. Unless it was paid by then the Abbot could seize and keep the estate of Lea.

He rubbed his fat hands together in pleasure at this thought. For Sir Richard's estate was worth ten times as much as the money he had lent him. He spoke to Sir Roger the Cruel.

'I think I can be sure that Sir Richard will not turn up in time to pay his debt. Is it not so?'

Sir Roger stroked his black moustache. 'Yes, my lord

Abbot, I can promise you that Sir Richard will not come. You shall have the rich lands of Lea. But I . . . what do I get in exchange?’

The Abbot’s small eyes came as near as they ever did to twinkling.

‘What say you, Sir Roger, to the prettiest creature in all Nottinghamshire? You know whom I mean. The little songbird is safely caged upstairs.’

‘Marian?’ Sir Guy asked.

The Abbot lowered his double chin in agreement. ‘Sir Richard’s own daughter. A fair bargain: I get Lea and Sir Roger gets the young lady.’

‘But what if she refuses to marry him?’ asked the Sheriff. ‘They say she still pines for that outlaw, that scoundrel Robin Hood.’

‘She will not be asked,’ the Abbot said. ‘I am her legal guardian and I have decided to give her in marriage to my good friend Roger.’

Sir Roger refilled his wineglass. His dark eyes gleamed with pleasure at the thought of the lovely Marian.

‘And when can I have her?’ he asked.

‘Not so fast, my friend,’ said the Abbot. ‘She will be sent to your castle, where the wedding will take place, say — early next week.’

‘But if Robin Hood gets wind of the matter?’ said Sir Guy.

‘That is just the point,’ said the Sheriff of Nottingham cunningly. ‘He will.’

‘It is all arranged,’ the Abbot smiled. ‘And this time, Sir Guy, you will have your revenge.’



*'Sir Richard will not turn up in time to pay his debt,'
said the Abbot*

They talked in low whispers for a while. The Sheriff explained his plan.

'And so, my lords,' he finished, 'we shall all be happy. The Abbot, my brother, will have his lands. Sir Roger will have the pretty wench. Sir Guy will have his vengeance. And I at last shall be rid of the man who has made me and my authority a laughing-stock throughout half England.'

Early next morning a monk from the Abbey arrived breathless in Sherwood Forest to tell Friar Tuck that the Maid Marian was being sent on Tuesday to Sir Roger's castle, a few miles on the other side of Sherwood Forest.

A day later one of Sir Guy's men, dressed like a serf,

reported that Marian would be escorted by only two armed men. She would be accompanied by large groups of barefooted monks who were going to assist at the wedding. The 'serf' told Will Scarlett the route they would take. They would pass through a corner of Sherwood Forest by a place called the Devil's Crossroads.

On the following afternoon a messenger delivered a note to Robin Hood from Marian herself. It said that if he came *alone and unarmed* to the Devil's Crossroads at noon on Tuesday she might be able to have a word with him. Robin read the note with interest. The handwriting was *almost* like Marian's.

Tuesday came and all was unusually quiet in Sherwood Forest. Sir Guy's 'serf', who again chanced to run into Robin Hood, went back to the Abbey to report that Robin and one or two of his companions were lazily playing dice, while the others had wandered off on their own, probably to the neighbouring ale-houses.

At about ten o'clock that morning two men rode out of the Abbey gates. They were gaily dressed, as befitted a wedding party, and they wore no armour — at least you couldn't see their armour under their bright silken robes. Behind them came dozens and dozens of monks, dressed in heavy black gowns and wearing cowls over their heads. As they walked along they chanted hymns — in rather harsh voices. In the midst of them rode Marian on a white palfrey. There was a veil drawn over her face so that people should not see that she went to her wedding with cheeks stained with tears.

The procession took the main road which skirted Sherwood Forest for a while, and then crossed a corner of it, leading finally to Sir Roger's tall, grim, stone castle.

As the monks entered the forest they closed their ranks and some of them actually made the sign of the Cross. But they saw no one and heard no one. When at last they reached the Devil's Crossroads their leader halted his horse. It was just noon. Faintly in the distance they could hear the tinkle of the Abbey bells. But no other sound.

Yes, there was another sound . . . The distant tramp of horses' hooves approaching from the opposite direction. The horseman smiled to himself. That would be Sir Roger and his armed knights who had arranged to meet the monks at this spot. He waited until the Abbey bells had finished striking before giving the command to go on.

As the bell struck twelve a young man in a green cloak leapt lightly down from a tree and stood in the midst of the monks.

He was apparently unarmed. He addressed the tall monk who rode beside Marian.

'I have been promised a word with the lady, worthy monk,' he said gently. 'With your kind permission . . .'

'Robin Hood!' cried Marian. 'Quick, Robin, flee! It's a trap!'

Before she could say more the tall monk threw off his cowl. Under it gleamed a steel helmet. The 'monk' was Guy of Gisborne.

'Take him, men!' shouted Sir Guy. 'Take him alive, for I wish to have the pleasure of hanging him myself.'

‘Neither alive nor dead, Sir Monk,’ said Robin, pulling out his longbow from under the folds of his cloak.

Quick as a wink he fitted an arrow to the string. He bent the bow so fiercely that the stout ash creaked in his hand.



A young man in a green cloak stood in the midst of the monks

‘The first man who moves is a dead man,’ he said.

For by this time all the so-called monks had thrown aside their disguises. They were — as Robin had known all along — Sir Guy’s own armed men. They stared at Robin. He had leapt up on to the high mound which marked the centre of the crossroads and his keen blue forester’s eyes noted every motion they made. They stared at Robin and they stared at the deadly arrow notched to the quivering bowstring.



Quick as a wink he fitted an arrow to the string

Many of them had seen Robin Hood shoot at the fair in Nottingham — and not one dared raise a finger.

Marian saw how the host of armed soldiers trembled before a single man and she felt her heart beat with pride. She loved Robin at that moment more than ever before.

‘And now, Sir Monk,’ said Robin coolly, ‘I should be grateful for that word with the lady. Or perhaps I had better escort her myself — since you and your men are so obviously cowards.’

Sir Guy flushed, but he was afraid to reply. Marian herself quickly spurred her palfrey to one side. Robin signalled to her to take the path on the left.

For at that moment the sound of galloping horses grew louder behind. Sir Roger's men were almost upon him, and it was no place for a woman to be. Sir Guy smiled in triumph, but Robin only grinned back. He was quite aware that treachery had been planned, and he knew that Will Scarlett and Little John had prepared a welcome for Sir Roger.

As the horsemen thundered up a score of green-clad figures dropped like apples on their heads. The trees above were alive with Robin Hood's men. In a moment the air was thick with arrows. Swords flashed in the cool shade of the woods. Knights in armour, used to fighting in the open,



*As the horsemen thundered up, a score of green-clad figures
dropped like apples on their heads*

were hopelessly hemmed in. The metallic sound of armoured bodies crashing to the ground mingled with the shouts of the warriors.

Robin Hood shot coolly but with a speed which bewildered his enemies. He was everywhere at once. A dozen of Sir Guy's men had fallen before the others began to run for safety. Sir Roger's men also were in full retreat. Out of the corner of his eye Robin saw Little John wielding his huge cudgel, felling knights and horses alike. He saw Friar Tuck pick up a man in monk's robes and toss him over the hedge. Friar Tuck had already discovered where the party carried its food supplies, and in between knocking people's heads together he found time to swallow half a ham.

It was a sorry band of stragglers who at last escaped from Sherwood Forest that day to tell the Sheriff of Nottingham that his plan had failed. Sir Guy, nursing a wounded arm, went back to the Abbey, this time on foot. Sir Roger returned to his gloomy castle without the bride he had set his heart on.

Where was Marian? In the midst of the outlaw band. They had made a throne for her out of willow twigs garlanded with woodland flowers. If Robin was the King of Sherwood Forest then Marian, they said, was the Queen. She looked like a queen, smiling and lovely and gracious.

Robin sat beside her and held her hand. Friar Tuck came to ask about preparing that night's banquet.

'Which shall I do first?' he demanded. 'You know I'm not only a cook, but a priest. Do I feed you, then marry you? Or marry you first and feed you afterwards?'



The banquet went on far into the night

To his disgust, Robin and Marian chose to be married. But the banquet followed, and it went on far into the night. Never had Sherwood Forest rung with such noisy good cheer. Never had Robin Hood been happier.

It was not until the next morning that he learned the bitter news that sent the whole band into mourning.

In yesterday's battle there had been one grave casualty. Will Scarlett had been wounded. Now it was discovered that he was missing.

A trusted messenger arrived with the dreadful news: Will Scarlett had been taken prisoner by Sir Roger the Cruel and lay in the dungeon of Sir Roger's castle, awaiting death.

The Prisoner in Evil Hold

It was a day of sorrow in Sherwood Forest. Robin's cousin, Will Scarlett, was much loved by the band. Little John wept openly like a baby and Friar Tuck refused food. Marian tried to comfort her husband.

'There's nothing that even you can do, dear Robin,' she said sadly. 'An army of a thousand knights could not break into Sir Roger's castle.'

Robin knew she spoke the truth. The castle was called Evil Hold and it rose high above a craggy hill. Its smooth walls were built of heavy stone and a deep moat filled with water surrounded it. A narrow drawbridge led across the moat and when this bridge was drawn up Evil Hold was cut off from the world.

Will Scarlett was doomed.

He lay in chains deep in the gloomy dungeon of Evil Hold. It was dark and dank down there far below the ground and he could not hear the preparations in the courtyard above for his own death. All he heard was the pitiful cry of an old man in the cell next to his who was being beaten by Sir Roger's torturer.

Sir Roger was in high spirits. He was proud of the fact that he was the only person in Nottinghamshire who had captured one of Robin Hood's men alive. He looked forward to hanging the outlaw and was putting up stands for his friends to watch the spectacle. They were gaily decorated with banners and bunting and there would be music and a feast afterwards.

Already the serfs and peasants on his estate were bringing in food for the kitchens. One old fellow in a cart was just urging his lean nag over the narrow drawbridge with a load of honeycombs. Sir Roger gave him a slash with his whip to make him hurry up. The poor old fellow cowered in fear and his blue eyes watered with the pain.

If Sir Roger had looked more carefully into those blue eyes he might have recognised them. But he didn't, and the cart rattled on over the cobblestones and into the courtyard. The bent old man got down from the cart, complaining loudly of his rheumatism. But he unloaded his cart with surprising swiftness.

'Your honey, honoured sir,' he said to Sir Roger and tossed him one of the parcels from the back of the cart.

Sir Roger, furious at the stupidity of the old fool, caught the parcel in his steel-gauntleted hand. It was not honey, not exactly. It was a beehive and it was full of very angry bees! They swarmed around the iron-clad knight, and though arrows could not penetrate his armour bees could! As the first one stung him Sir Roger knew whose blue eyes he had seen. They were Robin Hood's.

He gave a shout and at once his armed men rushed to him. Robin, no longer a bent old peasant but a very active young man, tossed half a dozen more beehives at them and a wasp's nest or two for good measure. They yelled so loud that the folk roundabout thought the castle was being attacked.

And suddenly it was. Robin Hood's silver bugle sounded clear and long from the castle walls. At once the throng of

peasants and countryfolk beyond the drawbridge began to crowd forward. Nearly half of them were Robin Hood's own men.

One giant of a beggar threw himself towards the drawbridge, but was met by a dozen men in armour. It was Little John and he grabbed the heavy battle-axe from Sir Roger's chief lieutenant and smashed it down on the fellow's head. It took a charge of cavalry with spear and lance to dislodge Little John from the drawbridge.

Meanwhile Friar Tuck had wormed his way into the courtyard in the disguise of a begging monk. He picked up the man who was trying to raise the drawbridge and threw him into the moat where he sank and drowned.



Sir Roger gave him a slash with his whip

The air was raining arrows now, but they could do little against stone walls and iron-clad men. In spite of Friar Tuck and Robin Hood's efforts to prevent the drawbridge from being raised, a score of Sir Guy's men were already tugging at the great chains which held it in position. Friar Tuck and Robin were only two against a hundred. With the drawbridge once up they would be prisoners as much as Will Scarlett was — and there would not be one hanging that day, but three.

Robin's men, led by Little John, threw themselves bravely at the bridge, but they were met with a wall of steel lances. They fell like flies into the moat, but all were good swimmers and reached shore again, where they at once renewed the attack.

Their position was hopeless and they knew it. Only armoured knights mounted on armoured horses could have broken through the defences of Evil Hold. Not that that stopped them from trying again and again.

Then something very strange took place. Along the dusty road winding up to the castle gates they saw a single knight galloping. He was a big man, almost as big as Little John, and he was dressed in black. His horse was black, his armour was black, the banner which waved from his tall lance was black. His visor was lowered and no one could see his face. Who was he? No one knew.

Lowering his lance, he charged up the drawbridge just before it could be raised. He charged like a steel-clad bull, sweeping all before him. Sir Roger's men were brushed aside by this furious and unexpected attack. Sir Roger,

who was no coward, sprang at him, sword in hand. With his huge battle-axe the Black Knight mowed down the armed men all around him as though they were ripe corn, and with them Roger the Cruel.

By this time Robin Hood's men, following after the Black Knight, had swarmed into the courtyard, and the fight raged on every side. Little John, laughing aloud with the joy of battle, swung wildly about him with his heavy cudgel. Friar Tuck tossed the enemy head over heels into the moat.

Robin Hood longed to stay and take further part in the savage fray, but he had more important work to do. He could see the mysterious Black Knight afterwards and thank him for saving the day. Meanwhile poor Will Scarlett was a prisoner.

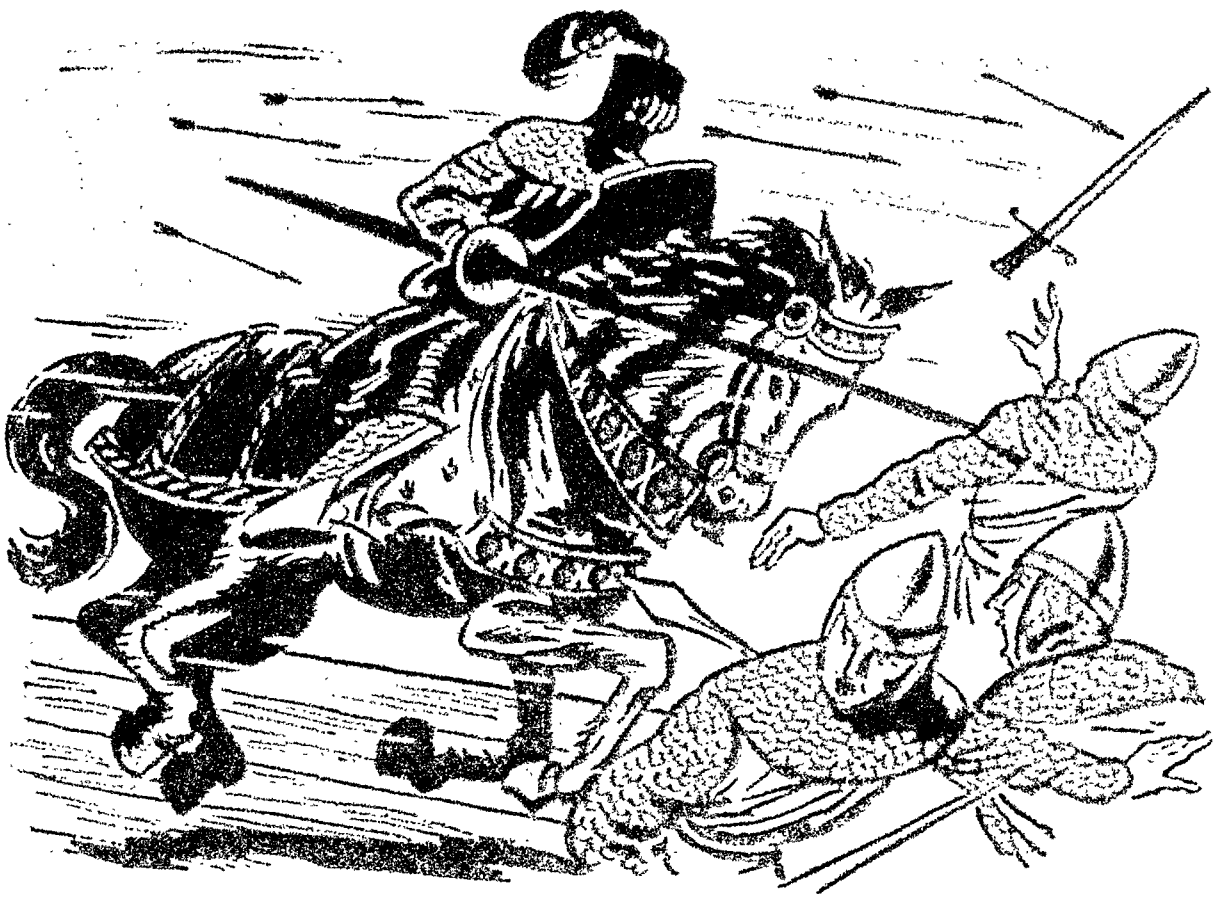
Robin found the narrow door which led down into the dungeon. On the wet, slippery stairs Sir Roger's men were still holding out. Robin flung himself on them like a madman, sword in hand. He cut his way through them and at last reached the dark places where Sir Roger kept his prisoners chained.

At the door of the torture chamber he met a huge monster, stripped to the waist, who wore a mask and carried a heavy axe. This was the torturer. In the darkness behind him Robin heard a man groaning.

'Will! Cousin Will, is it you?' Robin called.

A feeble voice in the darkness whispered: 'Here I am, Robin.'

Robin turned. By now his eyes were used to the dim light and he saw poor Will Scarlett's pale face behind the bars



Lowering his lance, he charged up the drawbridge

of a small prison cell. He grasped the iron door and shook it.

‘Robin! Careful. Behind you!’ Will gasped, just as he fainted.

But Robin had already heard the padding of bare feet behind him. He dodged lightly aside as the torturer’s heavy axe crashed down. Robin grabbed the brute by the leg. The half-naked man squirmed away and grasped a dagger. Robin seized the axe. It was heavy, even for Robin. He swung it, and the monster fell to the dungeon floor, never to rise again.

Robin swung the axe a second time. The cell door burst open. Again Robin swung the axe. Will Scarlett’s chains clattered to the ground. Will came to again as Robin

picked him up. He was weak from loss of blood and he just managed to whisper:

'There's another poor devil in the torture chamber. We must set him free too.'

Robin nodded grimly. He had almost forgotten that pitiful groan he'd heard behind the torturer. They reached the second prisoner and with the axe cut him free from his chains.

He was an old man with a white beard and white hair. He had been imprisoned in Evil Hold so long that he was weak from starvation. But even in his miserable condition they could see that he had once been a man of importance.



Robin seized the axe

He thanked them in a courteous voice and said he was strong enough to walk unaided. Will tried to help him. Robin, smiling grimly at the two enfeebled men, gave an arm to each. Painfully the three of them at last reached the courtyard above.

The old man blinked at the sight of the sky over his head. He looked in wonder at the sun which was beginning to sink in glory towards the west. He had not seen the dear light of day or smelt sweet fresh air for nearly a year.

A strange sight greeted them as they came out into the courtyard. The battle was over. Sir Roger was dead and all his knights and men-at-arms were either dead, drowned, or fled. Flames now belched forth from the high windows of the tall castle. Little John explained that the Black Knight had given orders that Evil Hold should be set on fire and destroyed.

‘But where is he?’ Robin asked. ‘That I may clasp his hand in gratitude.’

No one knew. The Black Knight had ridden away as mysteriously as he had come. They caught only a single glimpse of him. Mounted on his black charger, with his black banner flying from the point of his lance, he rode swiftly down the twisting lane, and vanished into the sunset like a ghost.

No one that day had seen his face.

Robin Hood’s band gathered together beyond the moat and watched the grim castle called Evil Hold burning. No longer would it be a terror to the countryside. No more poor men would be tortured and killed in its gruesome dungeon.

The band returned slowly to Sherwood Forest. Will Scarlett had been saved and for that they all thanked heaven — and the Black Knight. But many of their number had been wounded and one man had been killed.

Marian was waiting for them in the depths of the forest. She had gathered together a handful of countrywomen, relatives for the most part of the band. The women had made supper and prepared bandages and medicines for the returning warriors. For Marian had known that the battle would be fierce and long.

She gave thanks to God when she saw that Robin was safe. She threw her arms around him. He held her tenderly for a moment and then said:



'Father!' she exclaimed

'There's a poor old gentleman who needs your care, my dear. We found him chained up in Sir Roger's dungeon.'

Marian ran quickly to the stretcher on which they had carried the feeble old man. She knelt over him, searching for wounds. He opened his tired old eyes and as he did so they lighted up with astonishment and delight.

'Marian!' he said. 'Is it possible? Do my eyes deceive me?'

Her arms went round him. She went pale, and then she flushed with joy.

'Father!' she exclaimed. 'My dear father who, they told me, was dead.'

It was Sir Richard of Lea himself.

How the Abbot Was Paid

Will Scarlett, thanks to Marian's skilled nursing, made a rapid recovery. But Sir Richard's real doctor was Friar Tuck who fed him so well that the old man soon grew hale and hearty. Perhaps the fresh air of Sherwood Forest did its part too; for by the end of the month Sir Richard looked twenty years younger.

He told them how Sir Roger had treacherously captured him on his return from the Holy Land. Sir Roger had kept him for nearly a year in that dungeon on water and crusts of mouldy bread, just why Sir Richard didn't know.

'I think I know,' Robin said. 'The idea was our worthy Abbot's.'

‘But why should the Abbot wish to keep me in prison?’

‘Because you owe him money, Sir Richard. Because, if you remained in prison, you could not repay that money. And in that case he could seize your lands.’

‘Alas, I still cannot repay that money,’ said Sir Richard, ‘and he will seize my lands just the same. The debt falls due at sunset to-morrow and I shall then be a landless man.’

‘You have a son-in-law,’ Robin reminded him with a smile. ‘I will give you the money. How much is it?’

Sir Richard, too, smiled. He highly approved of the young man his daughter had married. Then his smile faded.

‘Alas,’ he said with a sigh, ‘the sum I owe the Abbot is one thousand gold marks.’

Robin whistled. A thousand gold marks was far more than the band’s treasury contained. They counted the coins hidden in the gnarled roots of the oak tree, but they came to hardly half that sum. Sir Richard shrugged and regained his good humour. Though he was an old man he was, he said, quite content to live with Robin’s band of foresters in the greenwood, doing what he could to help.

Robin remained thoughtful, however, and that night Marian grumbled gently because he came home so late. Had he perhaps found a prettier girl somewhere? Robin laughed at her and took her tenderly into his arms.

Next day Sir Richard went sadly to the Abbey to explain to the Abbot that he could not pay the debt he owed. The estate of Lea was worth many thousands of gold marks, and the old man had come to beg for a few more months of grace.

The Abbot of St. Mary's was in a particularly bad temper that day. He had a guest: a grave churchman who came with letters of authority sealed and signed by the King. Though King Richard was still supposed to be abroad the Abbot dared not ignore a person who came in the royal name. The man pushed his nose in everywhere, asking questions in his deep voice. His most irritating habit was that he insisted on keeping his face covered with his cowl.

He got on the Abbot's nerves. The worst part was that the Abbot had to be polite to him.

Then there were other reasons for the Abbot's ill-humour. The cook had ruined his dinner. Guy of Gisborne had come to say that someone had broken in last night and robbed the Abbey treasury. Exactly one thousand gold marks were missing. It was a disaster.

But there was one consolation. Here was Sir Richard of Lea come to say he could not pay his debt. The Abbot's mean little eyes twinkled. He even attempted a small joke.

'Sir Richard,' he said, 'but unfortunately no longer of Lea. Ha! Ha!'

'Sir Richard of Lea at least until sunset,' said the clerk whom Sir Richard had brought along with him.

The Abbot scowled at the clerk. He was an impudent young fellow in the costume of a begging friar. He wore a red beard.

'The sun will set in exactly five minutes,' the Abbot grunted.



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'Grant me but a few weeks more, my Lord,' begged Sir Richard. 'The estate of Lea has belonged to my family for generations. Without it I am but a pauper.'

'That is of no interest to me,' said the Abbot. 'Pay the debt you owe me or my men shall seize Lea this very night.'

'Have mercy on him, worthy Abbot,' said Sir Richard's clerk. 'He spent the money you lent him in the service of the King.'

'What is that to me? Enough of this tomfoolery!'

'For the sake of Holy Church,' cried Sir Richard, 'grant me but a few more days.'

'Not even five minutes!' the Abbot sneered.

In a corner of the room, unseen by the others, sat the mysterious churchman who had come to the Abbey in the name of the King. He said nothing, but he seemed to be making a note of how business was done in the Abbey of St. Mary's.

'Not even two minutes!' the Abbot shouted, darting a glance towards the window where the sun was about to set. He grasped the deeds to Lea Manor and held the old parchment in his greedy fingers. 'One thousand gold marks, Sir Richard, or these deeds of ownership are mine.' Sir Richard sighed. Then, to his astonishment, his red-



And he threw down a bag of gold

bearded clerk rose. His clerk was Robin Hood and Sir Richard had wondered why Robin insisted on coming with him to-day. Even in disguise such a visit was highly dangerous for Robin.

‘Think again, Sir Abbot,’ said Robin Hood.

And he threw down a bag of gold on the table. The Abbot went pale as he counted out the money. His fingers shook, but there was no mistake. The sum was correct. There were one thousand gold marks, no more, no less.

And so just in time Sir Richard paid his debt and left the Abbey with the deeds of Lea safely in his pocket.

There was only one person more startled than Sir Richard himself. This was the Abbot.

For as he counted the coins over and over again he suddenly realised something. It was the exact sum which had been stolen last night from the Abbey treasury!

It was, in fact, the same, identical money! And there was nothing he could do about it.

How the Black Knight Came Again

Shortly after Robin Hood and Sir Richard of Lea left the Abbey the Abbot’s mysterious guest also quietly made his departure. He didn’t say goodbye to the Abbot of St. Mary’s who was — though he didn’t yet know it — no longer the Abbot of St. Mary’s. The Royal Warrant, removing him from his high position, would not arrive for a day or two.

The churchman went out to the stables and saddled his own horse. It was a large, black horse and all its trappings were black. Sir Roger the Cruel might have recognised that horse — and its rider — had Sir Roger still been alive.

The churchman rode on alone, chuckling to himself as he thought of how Sir Richard of Lea's debt had been paid. He guessed that the clerk in the red beard was this same Robin Hood he had heard so much about. He looked forward to meeting the young rogue one day . . .

A few days later in Sherwood Forest one of the band came running to report that big game was in sight. A traveller, evidently a stranger, had just ridden into the forest. He was alone and by the look of him rich. Robin Hood and Little John went to see.

Sure enough, a single horseman was ambling through the woods, unaware of the danger he was running into. He was a monk and he wore rich robes and a velvet cowl. His horse carried a jewelled saddle and the bridle was studded with gold. He led a white mule which seemed to be loaded with precious silks. His saddlebags tinkled pleasantly with good coin of the realm.

A rich monk, obviously, and well furnished with this world's goods. Just the kind Robin Hood and his merry men liked.

Robin stepped into the road and took his horse by the bridle.

'Who are you and how dare you stop me on the King's highway?' demanded the monk haughtily.

‘In the absence of the King,’ Robin smiled, ‘this is my highway. You are plainly a stranger, Sir Monk, and do not know our local customs.’



‘Who are you?’ demanded the monk haughtily

‘Are you a robber, then?’

‘Only a tax collector,’ Robin laughed. ‘I charge a small fee for the use of the road.’

By this time Little John and the others were examining the white mule. In the saddlebags they found fifty gold marks.

‘Count out twenty-five for us,’ Robin ordered, ‘and let him keep the other twenty-five for himself. He is a bold-spoken

monk and I like the look of him, even though he keeps his face so carefully hidden.

‘And you call that a *small* fee, Sir. Robber?’ cried the monk.

‘I like this monk more and more,’ Robin laughed. He was not used to having rich churchmen speak out so bravely. ‘For his generous offering of twenty-five gold marks, I think we shall give him something in return. How say you, men, to a banquet this evening? It is not often we have a monk for a guest.’

And so the monk was led without further ceremony to the band’s headquarters where Friar Tuck welcomed the excuse to prepare a special feast.

‘A man of my own holy cloth,’ said Friar Tuck, clapping the rich churchman familiarly on the back.

The monk growled something behind his velvet cowl, but Friar Tuck only laughed at him. The band was in good form that night. All those who had been wounded earlier in the month during the battle of Evil Hold had now recovered. Sir Richard of Lea had taken possession of his estates and this too was a reason for celebrating. They decided to make their guest enjoy himself, in spite of his being a monk.

And enjoy himself he seemed to. Though he kept proudly apart from the others, he was seen occasionally to chuckle to himself behind his cowl. But he ate as heartily as Friar Tuck.

‘What is this meat, scoundrel?’ he asked Friar Tuck.

‘Venison, rogue.’

‘The King’s venison?’

‘The King lets us have the use of it while he is on Crusade. We look after it for him, so that Prince John shall not grow fat.’

The monk swallowed a morsel of venison the wrong way; but it was hard to say whether he was angry or amused. After the feast Robin Hood proposed a toast.

‘To our King,’ he said. ‘To Richard the Lionhearted — and may he come again someday to bring justice to this ill-ruled land.’

Everyone drank the toast heartily. Everyone drained his cup to the dregs — except the monk.

‘What, Sir Monk?’ said Little John. ‘You drink not to the King?’

‘I drink to whom I wish,’ said the monk haughtily.

‘Here you will drink to the King,’ said Little John, growing angry, ‘or else you will feel my quarter-staff on your ribs.’

‘And who, pray, are you?’ the monk asked with contempt.

‘That, Sir Monk, I will soon show you.’

And Little John twirled his quarter-staff. The monk rose and glanced fiercely round. Robin guessed what he looked for and handed him a staff like Little John’s. All gathered round to see fair play. And the match began.

Little John struck and the monk struck back. The band shouted with pleasure. This was no ordinary monk. In fact Little John, for the second time in his life, had met his equal. Perhaps even he might have met his master had not Robin put an end to the fight.

‘This is no way to entertain our guest,’ he said, ‘though truth to tell the monk — if monk he be — seems to enjoy himself. In fact I rather fancy he is more used to handling a sword than a prayer-book. How say you, Sir Monk?’



And the monk struck back

‘If you would care to test me, do so,’ said the monk proudly.

‘Let Will Scarlett try him!’ everyone shouted. For Will Scarlett was the band’s best swordsman.

Swords were produced — not sharpened swords, for Robin forbade that blood should be spilled. And again the strange monk proved his worth. Will Scarlett was soundly beaten.

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Though he took his defeat with good grace, the band was for a moment silent. Then someone suggested that their guest would like to try archery against Robin Hood himself.

The monk agreed and bows were brought. A target was fixed and Robin scored a perfect shot. His arrow struck the middle of the bull's-eye. The monk took aim. His bow twanged and the arrow sang through the air, but he could hardly hope to beat Robin's score, for Robin's arrow was in the dead centre of the target.

A cry of admiration went up. The monk's arrow had split Robin's arrow clean in two! Little John was the first to speak.

'I know now where I have seen this monk before,' he said. 'He is the Black Knight who saved us all at Evil Hold!'

Then Robin spoke. His voice was suddenly filled with awe. 'There is only one person in the world who could do what we have just seen done, Little John beaten, Will Scarlett outclassed, myself meeting my master. Sire,' he said, falling on his knees, 'forgive us.'

And the monk for the first time threw off his cowl. His face was proud and his dark eyes flashed. Around him the whole band knelt in deep humiliation, scarce daring to meet that face, at once beloved and feared.

For it was the face of Richard the Lionhearted, the face of their King.

For a moment King Richard watched them kneeling there before him. They were outlaws — yet the only honest men he had met since his secret return to England. They were poachers of the royal deer — yet the truest subjects he had seen. His stern features relaxed.

‘Men of Sherwood,’ he said, ‘to-night you will continue to make merry and I shall continue to be your guest. To-morrow I shall sign an order, saying that you are no longer outlaws but free men. You may, if you wish, remain in Sherwood Forest, but not as robbers. You will, if you wish, be my own Royal Foresters and wear the King’s badge on your Lincoln Green.’

A mighty roar went up. ‘God Save the King!’

Slowly Richard smiled. He took the sword with which he had disarmed Will Scarlett and lightly touched the kneeling Robin Hood on the shoulder.

‘Arise, Sir Robin,’ he said. ‘For now I do name you Sir Robert of Locksley, Royal Warden of my own Sherwood Forest.’

And there for many years Sir Robin and Lady Marian lived happily among their good friends and merry men.

